

26 March 2014

Ms Carmel Littleton
Director of Children's Services
Thurrock Council
Civic Offices
New Road
Grays
Essex
RM17 6SL

Dear Ms Littleton

Thurrock Local Authority focused inspections 24 – 28 February 2014

I am writing to inform you of the outcomes of the school inspections and telephone survey carried out across Thurrock during the focused period of 24 – 28 February 2014.

As you know, on Monday 24 February 2014, Paul Brooker Senior HMI and Tim Bristow Senior HMI met with you and Mike Peters (Strategic Lead, School Improvement, Learning and Skills), to explain the purpose of the focused inspections and the local authority's strategy for school improvement.

As you are aware, Ofsted is focusing some of its section 5 school inspection activity on particular local authorities with relatively low proportions of good and outstanding schools. In Thurrock, our concern centres on the low proportion of good or outstanding primary schools. Our inspections, coupled with a telephone survey of a sample of school leaders about their perception of the support and challenge from the local authority, have enabled us to obtain a clearer picture of the education provided for children and young people in Thurrock, and your role in supporting improvement.

Outline of focused inspection activities

We inspected seven schools as part of the focused inspection activity. The inspected schools consisted of six primary schools and one secondary school. The secondary school and one of the primary schools are converter academies. One of the primary schools is a free school. During the inspections, lead inspectors gathered information

on the use, quality and impact of local authority support for school improvement by asking the following three additional key questions of headteachers and governors:

- How well does Thurrock Local Authority understand the school's strengths and weaknesses, its performance and the standards the pupils achieve?
- What measures are in place to support and challenge the school, and how do these meet the needs of your school?
- What is the impact of Thurrock Local Authority's support and challenge over time to bring about school improvement?

We surveyed a further nine primary schools by telephone during the focused inspection period. These schools were selected randomly from the local authority's good schools. The schools' Headteachers were asked the same three questions in addition to a fourth, which reflected their status as good schools:

- To what extent does the school support others to improve? To what extent does Thurrock Local Authority facilitate or support this?

Inspection outcomes

Of the seven schools inspected as part of the focused inspection activity:

- three were judged to be 'good' - one of these schools was inspected for the first time, one improved from 'satisfactory' and one declined from 'outstanding'
- four were judged to require improvement, three of which were previously graded as 'satisfactory' and one school declined from 'good'.

It is encouraging that two schools have improved since their last inspection, to achieve a good inspection outcome. However, it is disappointing that two other schools have declined since their previous inspections and that three schools continue to provide an education for their pupils that is not yet good enough.

On reviewing the inspection reports from the focused period, it is clear that the inspection evidence affords examples of improving intervention and support from the local authority over the last year. It is unfortunate, however, that the support and challenge from the local authority was not more effective in improving the previously 'satisfactory' schools which still require improvement, or indeed in halting the decline of the school that was previously judged to be 'good'.

Survey responses

Responses to the key survey questions asked during the focus period were analysed. A summary of the findings is set out below:

Strengths

- Most headteachers and governing bodies are more optimistic about local authority leadership than in the past because they judge you and your senior colleagues to be effective.
- Data on school achievement, its evaluation and the reports received by schools, are perceived to be of a high quality. A number of headteachers describe this aspect of local authority support as excellent.
- Training for governors on judging pupils' achievement, safeguarding and financial management is considered to be effective.
- Strategies for the recruitment of good senior leaders are seen to be effective and are welcomed by governing bodies.
- School leaders feel that the Progress Board Meetings, initiated last September, are challenging schools more effectively to improve achievement.
- The engagement of Thurrock Improvement Consultants with grade 3 schools is generally seen as positive. The level of challenge and support these consultants offer schools is recognised to have improved over the last year and is now considered to be better tailored to meet the schools' needs.
- The local authority is generally successful in maintaining productive partnerships with academies and free schools.
- The induction and support for newly qualified teachers is considered to be effective.

Areas for development

- Past weaknesses in the local authority's strategic direction, vision, communication and support remain a cause of dissatisfaction for some schools.

- Schools identified the following remaining weaknesses in communication:
 - A perceived lack of transparency when the local authority decides on which tier (out of a four point scale) to place a school when determining the level of support to provide
 - Opportunities for school support from the local authority are missed by some headteachers because they do not get to hear about them
 - Personnel changes in the local authority have left schools unsure about who to contact when they need help.

- Remaining weaknesses in strategic direction and vision:
 - The local authority's strategy for linking good schools with those that require support is seen as ad hoc by some headteachers. Headteachers of good schools reported that they often make their own arrangements for school-to-school support
 - Some governing bodies and headteachers perceive that the local authority has a reactive approach to school improvement
 - The local authority is seen by some headteachers to have been too slow to act on the recommendations of last year's review of its functions
 - Headteachers of good schools do not believe that they are consulted sufficiently about the local authority's vision for the future.

- Training varies in quality because some is delivered by personnel who are not judged to be effective by headteachers and governors.

- Some good schools do not think they are challenged sufficiently. While these schools agree that the local authority has a good grasp of achievement through its analysis of performance data, they believe the authority knows little about the quality of teaching. One headteacher perceived this to be a reason why schools can decline from being good.

Summary

The inspections undertaken in the focused period indicate that there is still some way to go before Thurrock local authority is fully effective and consistent in supporting and challenging schools that are not yet good to improve quickly.

In the past, the local authority has not been successful at driving up standards in the quality of education in primary schools, which is why too few schools are currently good or outstanding. School leaders are now generally optimistic about the leadership of the local authority and consider that the support and challenge they receive has improved over the last year. School leaders would welcome more involvement in shaping the strategic direction of the local authority's school

improvement arrangements and they would like this to happen swiftly. Headteachers perceive that a more systematic and purposeful approach by the local authority to developing school-to-school support is critical to help schools that require improvement to get to good more quickly.

I hope these observations are useful as you seek to improve further the quality of education for the children and young people of Thurrock.

Please pass on my sincere thanks to the headteachers, governors and local authority officers who gave their time to speak to our inspectors during the focused inspection period.

I look forward to meeting with you to discuss the outcomes of this work.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sean Harford".

Sean Harford HMI
Regional Director, East of England